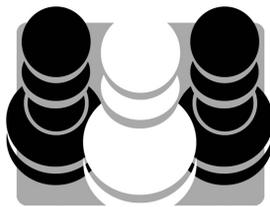


*Grandmaster Repertoire 1A*

# The Catalan

By

**Boris Avrukh**



Quality Chess  
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# Preface

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More than six years have passed since Quality Chess published my original contribution to its opening series, appropriately titled *Grandmaster Repertoire 1 – 1.d4 Volume One*, which was followed by its companion *Grandmaster Repertoire 2 – 1.d4 Volume Two* early in 2010. (These works will henceforth be abbreviated to *GM 1* and *GM 2* respectively.)

To my great surprise and satisfaction, these volumes were extremely successful. The recommended lines were employed by players at all levels, and demand grew to such an extent that the volumes were translated into several languages. Chess players took to referring to these texts as “The Opening Bible” and the term “to Avrukh” became part of the chess lexicon, meaning to have easily obtained an opening advantage after employing one of my novelties or recommendations.

Six years is a lifetime in the evolution of opening theory, especially in a battleground such as the Catalan, where ideas are constantly being tested and refined by the world’s top players and their pet computers. I do not claim to have refuted Black’s various defensive tries, but I have strived to offer fresh, challenging ideas that an opponent will find difficult to face over the board. That is the approach I take when working with my students, including some of the world’s top players.

## Series Structure

*GM 1* and especially *GM 2* were hefty books, numbering well over a thousand pages between them. Many of my original recommendations have since been tested and scrutinized by top grandmasters and correspondence players, making this new repertoire not so much an updated edition as a complete reworking, using the original repertoire as a loose template. In view of the many new games and discoveries that have occurred since the previous 1.d4 works, it was necessary to divide each book into an ‘A’ and a ‘B’ volume, with some slight reorganizing in terms of the grouping together of certain systems.

The opening moves 1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.g3 provide the starting position for the current volume *1A*. By far the biggest section of the book is devoted to the Catalan after 3...d5 4.♘f3, which is one of the ‘signature openings’ that defined *GM 1*. Against certain set-ups I was able to keep approximately the same recommendations for White, although in such cases I almost always found ways to tweak things to squeeze the best possible value from White’s position. In some lines, however, I opted to go in a completely different direction from before. See, for instance, the main line in Chapter 16, where 8.♙xc4 has been replaced by 8.a4, which I have employed with considerable success in recent years.

Although this volume is titled *The Catalan*, it also covers the Bogo-Indian, as well as any Benoni variants that may arise after 3...c5 in the aforementioned tabiya. In the Modern Benoni, important new resources have been uncovered against the sharp set-up I recommended in *GM 2*. That is why, in Chapters 24 and 25, you will find the more positional 10.♙f4 as our weapon of choice.

I know that many devoted chess players of all levels have been looking forward to this new *Grandmaster Repertoire* on 1.d4. I hope that the new series, beginning with the present volume *1A*, will provide the reader with many stimulating ideas, and, of course, excellent practical results.

Boris Avrukh  
Chicago, March 2015

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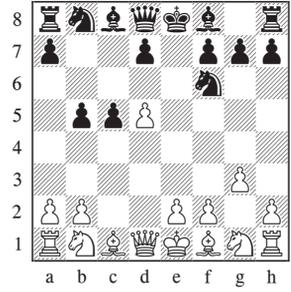
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# Chapter 22

## Odd Benonis



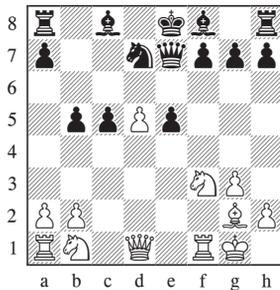
### Catalan Benoni

### Variation Index

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A) note to 12...f6



14. $\text{Nc3!N}$

B2) after 15... $\text{Na3!?$



16. $\text{Ne4!N}$

B32) note to 14...a6

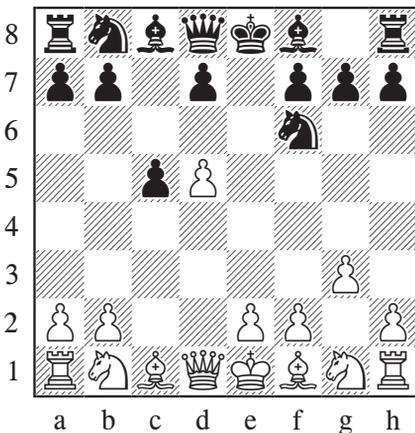


17. $\text{Nc6!N}$

**1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.g3 c5**

This is an important possibility, which I have encountered quite often in my own praxis. I can easily understand Black's thinking, as the Benoni offers him more counterattacking possibilities than many of his defensive setups against the Catalan. White's fianchetto system is not considered the most dangerous choice against the Benoni, and Black has a few different ways to handle the position, so there is decent potential to surprise an opponent.

Catalan players have tried to solve this problem in different ways. Some react to Black's last move with 4.♘f3, leading to a version of the English Opening. Others favour the 3.♘f3 move order, intending to meet 3...d5 with 4.g3, but this obviously allows the major option of 3...b6 with a Queen's Indian. Personally, I have always enjoyed playing against all Benoni variants, and have achieved a fantastic score with White. In the next four chapters I will share my knowledge and hopefully guide the reader towards similar success.

**4.d5 exd5 5.cxd5****5...b5**

This move will be the exclusive subject of the current chapter. I call it the Catalan Benoni because it almost always arises via the 3.g3

move order which is favoured by Catalan players.

Unlike some other variations covered in this book, this one requires detailed opening knowledge from White's side – you don't have to memorize every last detail, but nor can you rely solely on general principles. I remember a time when Black's last move was considered highly problematic for White, which was understandable, as Black normally has to work hard to carry out the ...b5 advance in the Modern Benoni. However, the fact that Black has not yet castled gives White chances to seize the initiative with a pawn sacrifice.

**6.e4**

I mentioned this as an interesting possibility in *GM 2*, but subsequent games and analysis have led me to recommend it as the main line.

In *GM 2* I recommended 6.♘f3, which brought White an excellent victory in Gelfand – Aronian, Mexico City 2007. This has also been tested in many games, and the popular 6...♙b7 7.e4 ♘xe4 resembles our main line, and may even transpose. However, the text move is more forcing and reduces Black's options.

**6...♘xe4**

This is obviously the critical continuation, but it is important to mention Black's alternatives.

**6...♙e7**

Black is trying to deflect White's light-squared bishop from attacking the b5-pawn. However, I found a remarkable email game where White found a convincing antidote.

**7.f3!?**

Maintaining the attack on b5. Black would get a comfortable position after 7.♙g2 d6 followed by ...g6, ...♙g7 and so on.

7...a6 8.♙h3!

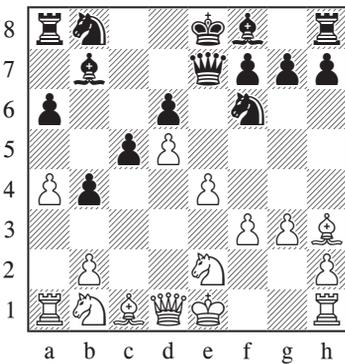
Impressive play, avoiding the stereotypical development to g2 in favour of a more active diagonal.

8...♙b7

8...g6 9.♘e2 ♙g7 10.a4 pretty much forces 10...b4, with similar play to the game. Instead 10...♙b7?! runs into 11.axb5 axb5 12.♖xa8 ♙xa8 13.♘a3! with a clear advantage.

9.♘e2 d6 10.a4 b4

Forced.



11.♘d2 ♘bd7 12.♘c4 ♘e5 13.♘xe5 ♗xe5 14.a5! ♖d8

15.♗a4† was threatened.

15.0-0 ♙e7 16.♘f4 ♘d7 17.♘d3 ♗d4† 18.♙g2 0-0 19.♙f4 h6 20.♖e1 ♖fe8 21.b3

White had a pleasant advantage in Bergmann – Kolar, email 2013.

6...♙b7

This prevents the e4-e5 threat, but ignores the b5-pawn.

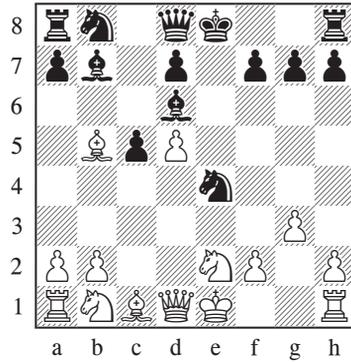
7.♙xb5 ♘xe4 8.♘e2

8.♘c3 also looks promising: 8...♗e7 9.♘ge2 ♘xc3 10.bxc3 ♗e4 11.0-0 ♗xd5 12.♗xd5 ♙xd5 13.♘f4 ♙f3 14.♖e1† ♘d8 15.♙c4 ♘c6 This was Terreaux – Nyvlt, corr. 2012, and here I would recommend 16.♖e3N ♙g4 17.♙xf7 ♙d6 18.♘d3±, followed by ♙a3, with a pleasant edge for White.

8...♙d6

Black might try to improve, but White

has easy development and should be better regardless.

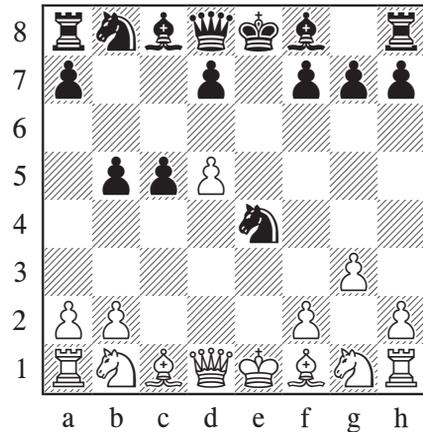


9.0-0 0-0 10.♘a3! ♘a6??

This move blunders a piece, but even after the superior 10...♖e8 11.♗d3 ♙f8 12.♘c3 ♘d6 13.♙f4 Black is under a lot of pressure.

11.♗d3 ♘b4 12.♗xe4+-

Duzhakov – E. Levin, Peterhof 2009.



7.♙g2!?

This surprisingly rare move seems extremely promising to me, and the arising positions are much easier to understand than after the messy 7.♗e2 ♗e7 8.♙g2. I spent many hours analysing the latter variation for Vladimir Kramnik back in 2007, helping him to score a nice win over Alekseev at the Tal Memorial that same year.

7...♘d6

This is the standard reaction. White's main idea is that the knight will block the d7-pawn for several moves, meaning that Black will experience serious difficulties developing his queenside pieces.

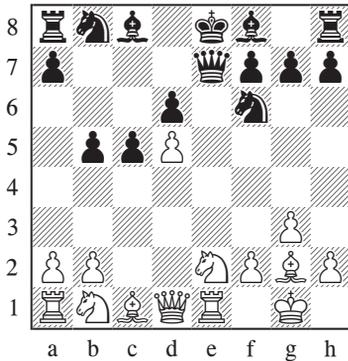
Obviously 7...♘f6?? is impossible due to 8.d6, hitting the rook while threatening to win material with ♖e2†.

7...♞e7? 8.♘e2!N

In both of the existing games White failed to exploit Black's error, and merely played 8.♞e2?, transposing to 7.♞e2 as mentioned above. I find it much more logical to go for castling, since Black's last move has left him a long way from completing development on the kingside, and the open e-file puts him in serious danger.

8...d6 9.0-0 ♘f6 10.♞e1

My engine suggests the surprising positional sacrifice 10.b4!?! cxb4 11.♞e1 ♞d8 12.a3, evaluating the position heavily in White's favour.



10...♞d8 11.♙g5 ♙e7 12.♙xf6! gxf6

Unfortunately for Black, 12...♙xf6 runs into the powerful 13.♘f4† ♙e7 (neither 13...♙f8 14.♘e6† nor 13...♙e5 14.♘d3 are much help either) 14.♘e6! fxe6 15.dxe6 and Black is losing material.

13.♘f4

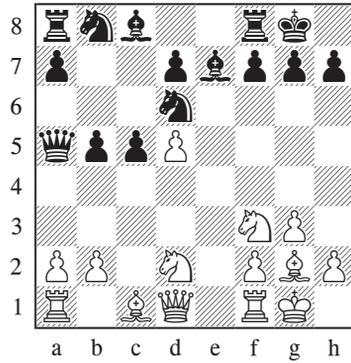
Black has a miserable position.

A final option is:

7...♞a5!?!N

This was mentioned by Petrov in *Grandmaster Repertoire 12 – The Modern Benoni* (henceforth abbreviated to *GM 12*) as an interesting alternative for Black, but it does not really help him.

8.♘d2 ♘d6 9.♘g3 ♙e7 10.0-0 0-0



11.♞e1!

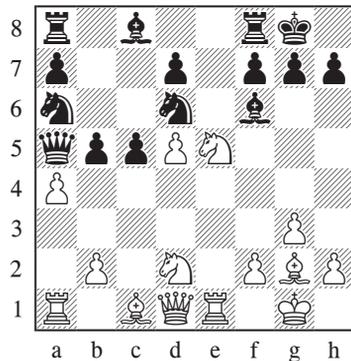
Petrov analyses 11.a4 ♘a6 12.♘b3 ♞d8 13.axb5 ♘xb5 14.♘e5 when White has a lot of compensation. However, I find the text move even more convincing.

11...♙f6 12.a4 ♘a6

Also after 12...bxa4 13.♞xa4 ♞d8 14.♘b3 ♘a6 15.♙f4± White's activity is too much for Black.

13.♘e5!

The threat of ♘g4 is difficult to meet.

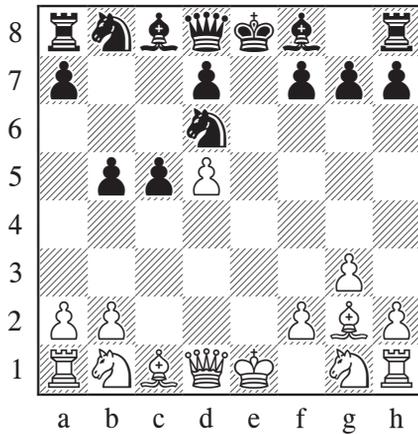


13...♙xe5

Other moves are even worse. For instance, 13...♖b4 14.♗b3 ♖c7 15.♗g4, followed by ♗f4, and 13...♞e8 14.♗g4 ♗e7 15.♗b3 ♖b6 16.♗f4± both clearly favour White. I also considered 13...♞b8 14.♗g4 ♖d8 15.♗xf6† ♖xf6 16.♗f3 and White's kingside initiative plays itself.

14.♞xe5 ♗b7 15.♗b3 ♖b6 16.axb5 ♗xb5 17.♗a5 ♞ae8 18.♗c4 ♖d8 19.♞xe8 ♞xe8 20.♞a5! ♗d4 21.♗e3

Despite being a pawn down, White has an overwhelming positional advantage.

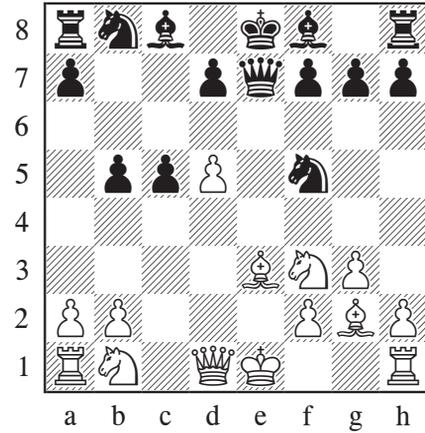


**8.♗f3**

This is the right moment to share a nice story with my readers. When I played in the Croatian League in 2012, one of my team-mates asked for my assistance in preparing the Catalan. We scheduled an appointment a few hours before the game, and he duly arrived at my hotel room armed with his laptop. He was actually happy enough with the Catalan, but he was worried about this version of the Benoni involving 5...b5.

The story continues under **A) 8...♞e7†**, the move that was troubling my team-mate. We will then move on to the main line of **B) 8...♗e7**.

**A) 8...♞e7† 9.♗e3 ♗f5**



I was really surprised when my team-mate told me about his approach to openings. He mentioned that he was relying on the Houdini Opening Book, where everything is perfectly analysed with Houdini, and all that the user has to do is memorize the moves. I started to explain to him that you cannot always trust such a source, and that there is still a need for human reasoning when preparing openings. He proceeded to open the program on his laptop, and we quickly moved to the present position, which Houdini had dismissed as unfavourable for White. I was surprised that nobody had tried this line for Black, and was keen to explore more deeply. The next few moves are obvious.

**10.0-0 ♗xe3 11.fxex3 d6**

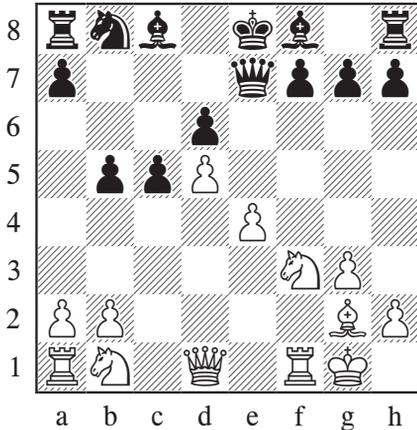
11...♞xe3†?? 12.♖h1 is just lost for Black.

The Houdini analysis ended here with an evaluation of clearly better for Black, but I was not ready to give up.

**12.e4!**

White wants to break through in the centre, exploiting the fact that Black, despite having won a pawn, is way behind in development.

A few months after our analysis session, I was lucky enough to be able to test this position for myself against the Israeli GM Ram Soffer in a rapid tournament. He had played 8...♖e7† with a triumphant look, but you can imagine his surprise when I blitzed out my next four moves. At this point he sank into deep thought and came up with:



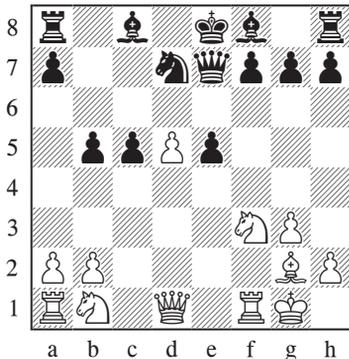
**12...f6**

I had briefly considered 12...♔g4, but after 13.e5! ♖d7 14.exd6 ♗xd6 15.♖c3 Black is in big trouble, due to the coming check along the e-file.

**12...♖d7**

This seems like Black's best try. It was the main option we investigated, and it was tested in a subsequent correspondence game.

**13.e5! dxe5**



**14.♖c3!N**

14.d6 only led to an unclear endgame after 14...♗xd6 15.♗xd6 ♔xd6 16.♖g5 f6 17.♔xa8 fxe5 when Black had three pawns for the exchange in Fordham-Hall – L. Van Damme, corr. 2013.

**14...♖b8**

14...c4? 15.♖e4 f5 16.d6 ♗e6 17.♖fg5 wins easily for White, so the text move is the best try.

**15.♖e4†**

Black is in grave danger. Apart from the obvious d5-d6, White also has attacking resources such as ♔h3 and ♖fg5.

**13.e5!**

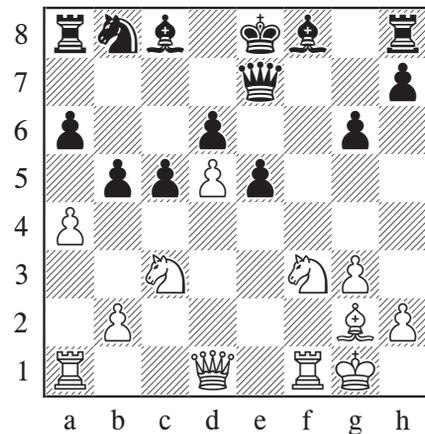
This secondary sacrifice improves the scope of all of White's pieces.

**13...fxe5 14.♖c3 a6 15.a4!**

I wanted to provoke ...b4 in order to get a powerful outpost on c4 for my second knight.

**15...g6**

My opponent realized that he needed to speed up the development of his kingside, and decided to return one pawn, but it is not enough to save him.



**16.axb5 ♔h6 17.♖d2! ♔f5 18.♖c4**

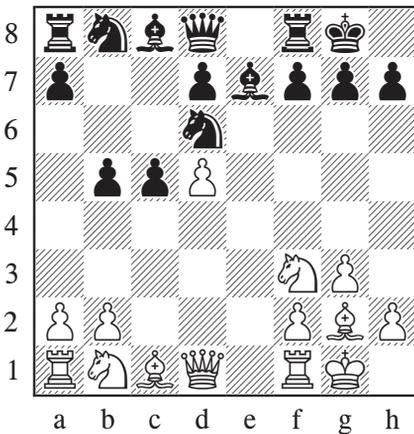
18.♗xf5N ♔xd2 19.♗f1 is also extremely strong.

**18...0-0 19.b6!**

Black soon found himself in a completely lost position in Avrukh – Soffer, Givatayim (rapid) 2013. Already he has no good moves, since 19...♘d7 loses to 20.g4!.

**B) 8...♙e7 9.0-0 0-0**

This leaves Black in less immediate danger than the previous line, but he still faces problems in coordinating his pieces.



**10.♙f4**

White’s strategy becomes clear. The d5-pawn seriously restricts Black’s queenside pieces, and finding a suitable way to develop them is no easy task – especially taking into account that moving the knight from d6 (in order to facilitate ...d6) will leave him susceptible to d5-d6. In short, I believe White’s compensation is more than sufficient.

Black’s three most important moves are **B1) 10...♞e8**, **B2) 10...♘c4!?** and **B3) 10...♞a6**. It is worth pointing out that the moves ...♞a6, ...♙b7 and ...♞e8 can be played in different orders, meaning there are transpositions galore. To make things easier to follow, I would like to point out that any set-ups where the knight goes to a6 in the next few moves will be covered under variation B3.

10...a5 11.♞e1 ♞a6 is hardly a good idea. In Korchmar – Taysayev, Taganrog 2014, the simple 12.a4N b4 (or 12...bxa4 13.♘c3! followed by ♘xa4) 13.♘bd2 ♙b7 14.♘b3 would have given White a huge advantage.

**10...♙b7**

I only found one game where this move was played, but it gives rise to a major transposition.

**11.♞e1**

This position has occurred in more than 60 games, most of them featuring Gelfand’s 6.♘f3 idea. However, in the great majority of cases, Black has developed his knight to a6 in the next few moves, transposing to a later variation.

**11...♞e8**

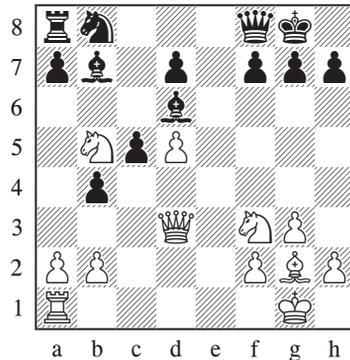
11...♞a6 takes us to variation B3.

**12.♘c3 b4**

Again 12...♞a6 transposes, this time to variation B31. The text move is an independent try, but White has a good answer.

**13.♙xd6 ♙xd6 14.♞xe8† ♞xe8 15.♘b5 ♞f8 16.♞d3!**

This excellent move secures White’s advantage. Aside from the obvious idea of ♞e1, Black also has to watch out for ♘g5, which explains his next move.



**16...g6 17.♘d2 ♙a6 18.♞e1**

Unfortunately for Black, the simplifications have not solved his main problem: the undeveloped queenside.